



Turkey for the Holidays

Turkey Safety

The most Frequently asked Questions at Thanksgiving.

Turkey Safety

My Relatives tried to kill us for years with their turkey. Not intentionally, of course, they just didn't know any better. Do you remember getting the flu during the weeks before Christmas? We all thought that getting sick around the holidays was the result of sitting out in the cold damp weather watching the Thanksgiving Day Parade, and with all the running around during the weeks before Christmas, the bad cold would never really go away. Then, after Christmas Dinner (also turkey at our house), I'd really get sick. Full blown flu, the kind that takes weeks to recover from. Now that I'm older, and a bit more educated about safe handling procedures I don't get "the flu" after Thanksgiving. It was, I now know, mild food poisoning, which then weakened the body's resistance to colds, and then another dose of food poisoning on top of the first didn't give the body a chance to recover. This year, when you roast your delicious Thanksgiving bird, take a couple of precautions used in professional kitchens to insure your holiday is as healthy as it is happy.

First, determine if you are going to go with a fresh or frozen turkey. I'm not going to debate which is better: for some, the cost per pound savings of frozen outweighs the supposed "taste difference" of the fresh. Others insist only fresh turkey is best. I personally never met a Thanksgiving dinner I didn't like. And as a connoisseur of delectable, crisp turkey skin, may I just say that when I get that first bite in my mouth, I'm in food heaven. I don't care what part of the fridge the bird hung out in for the week before, as long as it was properly refrigerated. The reason I mention it here is, if your preferred turkey is fresh, you may need to order it in advance. If it is frozen, you need to give it enough time to thaw properly in the refrigerator. That's 4 or more full days, depending on the size of the bird. The rule is 24 hours for every 5 pounds. I know what you're wondering: if I pick up a small frozen turkey on Saturday with my regular food shopping, can I put it directly into the fridge to thaw for more than 3 days? Yes. Just like buying a whole chicken, turkey will stay good in the fridge for a couple days after it's fully thawed. If the turkey is thawed completely by Tuesday, it will still be excellent Thursday.

Next, a little pre-holiday strategy: clean out your fridge before you go food shopping, and wipe it down with a bleach rag. Get a large sheet pan to set the turkey in to catch the raw run off drippings while it sits in the fridge. Clear out the bottom shelf and make room for the bird and the sheet pan before you go to the grocery store, so that the turkey won't sit out while you try to make room for it after you bring it home. This is both safe handling and proper temperature control of your turkey.

Bring your turkey home, leave it in the wrappings, and immediately place the bird in the fridge, on the sheet pan. If you get a turkey that's been sealed in plastic, it may still drip as it rests, so it's best to always place any turkey on a drip catching pan. Let your turkey (if it's frozen) thaw naturally in the fridge. Don't take it out and leave it on the counter for hours to "speed it up," don't try to quick thaw it by placing it into the oven at a low temperature, (or try "blasting" it at 500°F on Thanksgiving day) or by using blow dryers or whatever else you've heard rumor of that supposedly helps get the bird thawed faster. There is one correct and safe way: in the fridge, on a sheet pan, for several days. The other ways invite salmonella to grow and spread in the thawed meat while part of the meat is still frozen, and worse, may keep the bird from being fully cooked when you take it out of the oven. Once the bird is completely thawed, don't forget to remove the package of giblets from the body cavity!



A word on stuffing the turkey: don't. Think about what you are doing when you put a soft, bread mixture into a raw turkey carcass. As the bird cooks, juices will be dripping into the stuffing mixture. The stuffing is "steaming hot" when you spoon it out of the bird, so you think that it's full cooked, right? It's not. Turkey needs to cook to an internal temperature of 165°F. If the bird is stuffed while it is raw, the stuffing also needs to be brought up to 165°F, because it is "contaminated" with uncooked and undercooked turkey juices. I know, I'm not going to be very popular with this advice. And if you want to tell me to "stuff it", so to speak, and go ahead and roast your stuffed turkey the way our mothers and grandmothers always did, then I understand. But think back to the turkeys your grandmother made...was the white meat moist, or really dry? Like dust? Did you need the gravy to moisten it (not just for flavor)? Did she check to see if it was done by wiggling the drumstick? Does the phrase "cook it till the meat falls off the bones" bring back fond memories? Turkey was cooked to a much higher internal temperature by our grandmothers (over 185°F!). I remember white meat so dry you could choke on it (I miss it so!) - and everyone pouring on lots and lots of gravy. And the stuffing was dry, too. It got gravy poured on it, too, before the days of fat grams and fax machines. Today, we cook the turkey until the meat is done, but it is still moist and tender (and much lower in temperature when it is "finished"). That means the internal temperature of the stuffing is lower. Think of a stuffed bird as a solid object; if you put it into a hot oven, you're cooking it from the outside in. So when the meat reads 165°, the stuffing in the very center is probably at 135° (steaming hot!). Which means the juices in the stuffing are still 30 degrees too raw when you stop cooking and pull the bird out of the oven.

So how do you make delicious stuffing for your turkey? The same way you always have, but then bake it in a separate foil-covered roasting pan, while the turkey's in the oven. Use some turkey stock to give it that great flavor we all know and love. After the bird is fully cooked and out of the oven, mix some of the roasting pan drippings and fat into the stuffing before you make the gravy. You'll find two distinct advantages to cooking an unstuffed bird: the turkey cooks faster and more evenly, because hot air can circulate inside the body cavity (thus, also cooking it from the inside out) and the you have perfect

control over the moistness/ dryness of your stuffing. You can add more stock if it gets a bit dried out, and you can add less if you like the stuffing fluffy and crisp. And, because it wasn't placed inside the raw turkey, you don't need to cook the stuffing to 165°F. Especially if the sausage you mixed in was already browned before making the stuffing.

If you want to add more flavor to the bird as it roasts, rub it inside and out with butter and a mixture of salt, pepper, and chopped fresh herbs (like rosemary, sage and thyme) before you put it in the oven. Rub the same flavors as those in the sausage of your stuffing onto the bird, and they will also be infused into the gravy, through the pan drippings. You want to still roast your turkey to an internal temperature of 165°F on your meat thermometer. Only use the roasting time directions as a guide line; the real test of doneness is with your handy, all-purpose temp that you keep clipped to your shirt pocket. The place to temp your turkey is the body meat under the thigh, but be careful that the thermometer doesn't touch a bone when you stick it in. That is the slowest place to heat up on the turkey carcass. The breast meat cooks much faster than the inside dark meat, both because white meat is less dense, and because the dark meat is protected from the oven's heat by the legs. If you temp the breast meat about an hour before the time the turkey should be "done" (according to the time guidelines) you may notice that the breast meat is significantly hotter than the thigh meat. To slow the cooking down, carefully cover the breast area loosely with a sheet of aluminum foil.

The time guidelines, for slowly roasting your unstuffed turkey to juicy, delicious perfection are:

1. Oven at 325°F
2. Approximately 3 hours for a 6 pound turkey, add 10-12 minutes for each pound over 6. Up to 6 hours total for a 25 pound bird.
3. For crisp, dark browned skin, don't baste.
4. Temp the bird 2/3 the way through cooking to gage how it's doing. Your oven may run a little hot or cold. 165°F is Done.
5. Always sanitize your thermometer before and after you stick it into the bird, even between checking the breast meat vs. the thigh meat. (One section may be cooked while one is still raw.)
6. Let the bird rest for 20 minutes or so before carving, for juicier and more flavorful meat.

Don't be intimidated if you're roasting a turkey for the first time. Just think of it as a great big fat chicken. And safety first: after you put the turkey in the oven to roast, don't leave the house for any reason. Let someone else run out for the cranberry sauce. There are worse things than Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner without some forgotten ingredient... your local firefighters would really like to spend the night with their families, too. Have a healthy, safe and happy holiday, and make sure you have a big helping of stuffing for me. Good Luck!

Quick Reference

Thawing Safely

In the refrigerator

- Thaw the turkey in its original wrap on a tray placed in the bottom section of the refrigerator.
- Allow about 24 hours of defrost time for every 5 pounds of turkey. Example: a 20 pound turkey will take 4 to 5 days to thaw.
- Do not thaw on the counter. Thawing at room temperature increases the risk of bacteria growth.
- At room temperature, bacteria on the turkey can grow rapidly when the outside portion of the bird begins to thaw. These bacteria can multiply to dangerously high levels producing toxins that cooking may not destroy.

In cold water

- Thawing in cold water is safe too. Submerge the bird in its wrapper in a deep sink of cold water and change the water every 30 minutes to keep it cold.
- Allow 30 minutes per pound to defrost a turkey in cold water. Do not use warm or hot water.

Microwave Thawing

- Microwave thawing is another option. Make sure your microwave oven is large enough to hold the turkey especially if the oven has a rotating tray.
- Check manufacturer's instructions for the size turkey that will fit into your oven.
- **Caution: Microwave defrosting is irregular, creating hot spots, which may encourage bacterial growth. Cook the turkey immediately after defrosting. Do not store in the refrigerator for cooking later.**



- Never stuff the turkey in advance in an effort to save time.
- Once you have decided on a stuffing recipe, mix ingredients quickly and lightly stuff the washed cavity just before placing the bird in the oven.
- Chopping vegetable ingredients and bread preparation can be done in advance, but liquids and/or moist ingredients should not be added to dry ingredients until just before stuffing the turkey.
- Allow 1/2 to 3/4 cup stuffing per pound of turkey.
- Stuffing needs room to expand during cooking, do not over-stuff.
- The stuffing recipe may be more than your turkey can hold. Place extra stuffing in a greased pan or casserole dish and bake separately.
- Stuffing contains potentially hazardous ingredients, such as broth, eggs and meat, etc. That means these ingredients could cause illness if not properly cooked and stored.
- Stuffing must be cooked to a minimum temperature of 165°F to be safe.
- Stuffing should be removed from the cavity of the bird to a separate dish before carving the turkey.
- Do not leave stuffing and other leftovers out for more than 2 hours. Refrigerate leftovers immediately following the meal.
- Store leftover stuffing in the refrigerator and use within 1 to 2 days.
- Reheat leftover stuffing to 165 degrees F before serving.

Cooking Turkey Safely

- Decide how much turkey you will need before you shop. Buy one pound per person or 1 1/2 pounds per person if you have hearty eaters or want ample leftovers.
- Buy and use a meat thermometer (see [Using a Thermometer](#)) dark meat takes longer to cook so always insert the thermometer in the thickest part of the turkey thigh. It will register 180°F when the turkey is done.
- Make sure you have a roasting pan large enough for the turkey.
- Allow an adequate number of days to refrigerator-defrost a frozen turkey (see [Thawing Safely](#)).
- Wash hands, sinks, counters, utensils and platters thoroughly with soap and hot water before and after working with raw turkey.
- Remember to remove the giblet bag from inside the turkey.
- Stuff just before roasting or cook stuffing separate from the turkey.
- Allow the cooked turkey to sit for at least 20 minutes before carving. During this time juices will be redistributed and the turkey will be easier to carve.
- After the meal, cover and store leftovers in the refrigerator as soon as possible.
- Remember the safest margin is 2 hours from the time you take the bird out of the oven.
- Leftover turkey will keep in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 days.

Holding Time

- If the turkey is done ahead of schedule, it is safe to hold it in the oven at a reduced temperature, 200°F.
- Leave the thermometer in the turkey and make sure that the temperature of the turkey does not drop below 140°F during holding time.
- Keep the turkey covered so it does not dry out.

Storing Leftovers

- Plan ahead, clean out the refrigerator and make room for leftovers several days before the holiday feast.
- Leftovers should be stored in the refrigerator within 2 hours after cooking is completed. Why just 2 hours? Because bacteria that cause food poisoning can multiply to undesirable levels on perishable foods left at room temperature for longer than that.
- Large quantities should be divided into smaller portions and stored in several shallow containers. Food in small amounts will chill faster keeping it safer and fresher.
- If a large amount of turkey is left, consider freezing some for later use. Do not wait until the turkey has been in the refrigerator for 4 days to freeze it. Freezing will not improve the quality of the turkey. If the turkey is frozen while it is fresh the quality will be better upon defrosting.

Using a Thermometer

- Meat thermometers can be found in the housewares section of most grocery stores, in department stores and in specialty stores. Buy a thermometer, it is a sound investment in food safety.
- An instant read thermometer can be digital or dial gauge and it comes in a storage case. Read the information on the package. Instant read thermometers have plastic heads and cannot go into the oven while the turkey is cooking. However, it will register the temperature of food within 15 seconds when the metal tip is inserted up to the dimple on the stem, thus the name "instant read." Always clean the tip before returning it to the case.
- Standard meat thermometers are metal and designed to withstand oven temperatures. The sensing area is from the tip to a half-inch past the dimple. This area registers the temperature of the food. Examine the thermometer and familiarize yourself with the dial settings.
- Positioning the thermometer in the turkey is not difficult. Always place the thermometer in the thickest part of the thigh because the dark meat of turkey thigh takes longer to cook than any other part.

The thigh area closest to the body of the turkey is the thickest part. While you are washing the untrussed turkey, look for a spot to position the thermometer.

- Gently spin the head or dial of the meat thermometer around so you can easily see the reading without removing the turkey from the oven. As the turkey roasts, the thermometer may move out of position, don't worry, simply reposition the thermometer. The turkey is done when the temperature reads 180°F.
- Oven thermometers read the temperature of the air inside of the oven. They are also useful for monitoring the temperature under the lid of a grill. If the oven thermometer registers a higher or lower temperature than the setting, adjust the oven temperature.
- Check the accuracy of the thermometer (especially an old one) by placing it in a large cup of 50/50 ice and water slush for 10 minutes. It should read 32°F. Thermometers are considered accurate if they are within two degrees on the plus or minus side.
- To correct the temperature, use a small wrench to turn the calibration nut until the thermometer reads 32°F. For a digital thermometer, simply change the battery.